

VZCZCXRO3758  
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHKB #1164/01 2201058  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 081058Z AUG 06  
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0975  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAKU 001164

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/08/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [AM](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI PUBLIC BEGINS TO DEBATE MINSK GROUP  
CORE PRINCIPLES, SEES REFERENDUM AS REDLINE

REF: A) BAKU 1021 B) BAKU 976 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JASON P HYLAND PER 1.4(B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: In the weeks since the OSCE Minsk Group core principles for a settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict have become public, reaction in Azerbaijan has shifted from official protestations of surprise and knee-jerk sloganeering to a more nuanced discussion of the merits of the principles led by a group of prominent political analysts. There has been a distinct lack of angry public outburst over the principles, most evident in the Karabakh Liberation Organization's mild July 28 statement that accepted the proposed return of five territories as a positive step. However, all Azerbaijanis -- regardless of political affiliation -- see the proposed referendum as a redline that cannot be crossed. They also view long-term arrangements for corridors in Lachin and Kelbajar as in need of further scrutiny. More worrisome for the long-term prospects for peace, most Azerbaijanis believe that the very act of negotiating over the occupied territories constitutes a concession on the part of Azerbaijan and, for this reason, see the entire Minsk Group process as skewed in favor of Armenia. With time, broad public debate over the core principles of a peace deal hopefully will change these public attitudes. The challenge now is to harness the fledgling public debate led by a small group of political analysts into a broader and far-reaching debate that helps steer the general public into a conscious cost-benefit analysis of peace. The lack of GOAJ public reaction to the analysts' efforts to promote debate indicates that the GOAJ understands the challenge and is giving political activists room for debate. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT

12. (C) In the weeks following the public release of the OSCE Minsk Group's core principles, the chattering classes have slowly been debating the Minsk Group negotiation process and the intent of the disclosure of the agreement. The initial reaction of surprise to the release and the slogan-like comments (ref a) have evolved into a more constructive dialogue. Government officials, Members of Parliament (MPs), political party leaders, political analysts, and members of civil society consistently make the same point: that the idea of conducting a referendum should not be up for discussion until Armenia withdraws its forces from the territories. Azerbaijanis from a broad range of views - whether opposition, independent, or pro-GOAJ - agree that this is a redline that should not be crossed.

KLO'S COMMENTS

13. (SBU) Not surprisingly, the strident Karabakh Liberation Organization was quite critical of the principles. In a July 28 press interview, KLO Chairman Akif Naghi said that the

Minsk Group acts in favor of Armenia and that the Co-Chairs' negotiations only serve Armenian interests. According to Naghi, the disclosure of the framework agreement evidenced the fact that for Azerbaijan, further participation in the negotiation process is not reasonable. In contrast to his typically negative comments, Naghi said that there is one positive aspect of the framework - the liberation of five of the occupied regions - but that the other aspects are "fully in line" with Armenian interests. Naghi concluded that the GOAJ is not taking serious diplomatic steps, and that because peaceful measures have not been effective, Azerbaijan should consider the use of force. In a separate appearance on a television program, Naghi insisted that Azerbaijan should never agree to a referendum, because the conduct of a referendum could facilitate Armenia's claims to the territories.

#### WORD FROM THE KARABAKH MPS

-----

14. (C) In a meeting with Poloff, two MPs from the occupied territories, Astan Shahverdiyev and Sevindik Hatamov shared their frustration with the negotiation process. They said that Azerbaijan is a strategic partner for the U.S. and that they do not understand why the USG will not support Azerbaijan in the conflict. According to Shahverdiyev, the U.S. understands that Armenia is the aggressor, but does nothing because of the influence of the U.S. Armenian lobby. He said that DAS Bryza's comments that President Aliyev and President Kocharian should prepare the public for compromise is not accurate, because compromise with Armenia simply is not possible. He also said that the Co-Chairs are being unrealistic in proposing a referendum, because a discussion on this matter will not be possible until Armenia withdraws

BAKU 00001164 002 OF 004

its troops. Shahverdiyev argued that returning five out of seven territories does not make sense, and that the Minsk group must be aware that the public will only accept the return of all territories. Hatamov, who is from Lachin, said that he cannot imagine a solution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict without a full return of Lachin. The two MPs said that they frequently visit their constituents in the IDP/refugee camps, and that a singular thought exists among them - that of returning home.

#### THE OPPOSITION SPEAKS UP

-----

15. (C) The Deputy Chairman of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, Sardar Jalaloghlu, told Poloff that the appointment of DAS Bryza as Co-Chair of the Minsk Group was not aimed at facilitating mediation, but rather to coerce the GOAJ into compromising. In his opinion, the framework agreement is asking Azerbaijan to make changes that are not a fair compromise - namely the conduct of a referendum. Similarly, opposition MP Jamil Hasanli told Poloff that he is pleased neither with the decision to release the framework agreement nor with the content of the agreement. He explained that the issue should be viewed as black and white - as aggressor versus victim. According to Hasanli, if the U.S. does not see this distinction, resolving the conflict is impossible. He said that the Azerbaijani people are upset with the way the U.S. is treating the problem, and that because the Minsk Group lacks the necessary mechanisms to solve the conflict, the negotiation process should be left to Azerbaijan and Armenia. Hasanli concluded that the Azerbaijani people feel that the international community, particularly the U.S., is pushing Azerbaijan to concede, and that the vast majority of the population supports the GOAJ stance on this issue. Fuad Mustafayev, Deputy Chairman of the Popular Front Party (PFP) and Seymour Khaziyev, an active member of the PFP youth movement, raised strong concerns over the idea of a referendum.

FROM THE ANALYSTS

-----  
16. (C) Political analyst Leila Aliyeva told Poloff that the release of the framework has put more pressure directly on President Aliyev and President Kocharian. Although so far there hasn't been much of a reaction to the release of the framework, Aliyeva said, the public might react later. The fact that most Azerbaijanis do not read newspapers, relying instead on television news - which according to Aliyeva, is completely controlled by the GOAJ - accounts for the population's general political apathy. (Note: Aliyeva's assessment does not take into account the independent ANS television station, which reports on the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and the negotiation process in great detail.) As for the content of the framework, Aliyeva feels that most of the provisions are reasonable - with the exception of the referendum. She argued that holding a referendum within Nagorno Karabakh would not only contradict the Azerbaijani Constitution, but also that it would be contrary to international norms supporting a country's territorial integrity. Aliyeva concluded that the Minsk Group is clearly in favor of the Armenian side, and that the Co-Chairs are largely ineffective.

17. (C) Rasim Musabayov told the Embassy that in his opinion, the information was disclosed because the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs have run out of ideas and exhausted their options. He also thinks that the timing of the release was intended to bring the issue to light right before the G-8 summit. Zardusht Alizade commented to the Embassy that the recent events demonstrate in-fighting between the Minsk Group Co-Chairs. He feels that the USG is trying to eliminate Russian influence in the Caucasus, and wants to create GOAJ and GOAM dependence on the USG in terms of conflict settlement. Policy analyst and political activist Dadash Alishov, in contrast, told Poloff that the disclosure of the information was not surprising. He was pleased with the honesty of the Co-Chairs and noted that the framework agreement will provoke debate, bringing the issue to light in both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Alishov commented, however, that much of the general public does not seem to have noticed that the framework agreement was released.

18. (C) In a joint statement released on July 28, ten of Azerbaijan's most well-known political analysts praised the disclosure of the framework agreement, but noted that a peace agreement between the two sides is only possible if it is accepted and supported by the greater public. The statement argued that precise interpretation of the principles will be

BAKU 00001164 003 OF 004

necessary, and that two aspects must be further broken down: the "liberation" of the Kelbajar and Lachin regions, and the conduct of a referendum on the future status of Nagorno Karabakh. The statement concluded that the proposed principles are "balanced" and that their adoption might serve as a strong base for the beginning of the peace process and development of a wider agreement. In a television interview, one of the analysts, Eldar Namazov explained that the intent of the statement was not "pure acceptance" of the Minsk Group proposals, but rather it was intended to reflect the areas that need "correction" so that the framework may be used as a basis for the peace process. He believes that the document outlines a step-by-step approach that is acceptable for Azerbaijan.

AN INDEPENDENT VOICE  
-----

9. (C) Asim Mollazade, an MP and the Chairman of the Democratic Reforms party, told Poloff that he believes releasing the information to the public was the correct step to take at this juncture. He hopes that the announcement will inspire serious public discussion on the negotiation process. Echoing public sentiment, Mollazade explained that his party does not support the idea of a referendum until after the

IDPs and refugees return to the territory. Only at that point, he argued, can Azerbaijan seriously support peace and work on building measures of confidence. That being said, he continued, the Armenian side is clearly not ready to reach a peace agreement. In Mollazade's opinion, the current Armenian leadership has established power based on the conflict and is not ready to relinquish its power.

#### A RULING PARTY PERSPECTIVE

-----

¶10. (C) Yeni Azerbaijan Party MP Malahat Hasanova told Poloff that there is a singular opinion in Azerbaijan on the negotiation process, and that talking to oppositionists, centrists, and pro-government individuals would yield the same result. According to Hasanova, the core belief of the Azerbaijani population is that Azerbaijan's territorial integrity must be protected and, for this reason, that discussion of a referendum would only be possible after Armenia withdraws its troops. Hasanova recently spent several days in her constituency (the village of Shamkir, which is near Ganja), and said that people may not be aware of the details of the negotiations, but they are certainly aware of the principles. In conversations with her constituents, Hasanova continued, people expressed their frustration of the perceived lack of progress in the negotiation process, and argued that compromise with Armenia is not possible. Hasanova added that her constituents see the economy growing stronger, and feel that Azerbaijan could easily strengthen its military and prepare for war.

#### PUBLIC OPINION?

-----

¶11. (C) In an attempt to gauge general reaction to the core principles, we queried a broad cross-section of Embassy contacts and ordinary Azerbaijanis and found that few people were aware of the details of the core principles. Even the well-educated and generally politically aware appear not to be following the details, for example a returned Muskie scholar who said he had been following the news regarding the negotiations, but wasn't aware of the new announcement. He expressed his opinion that many Azerbaijanis have not noticed the release of the framework agreement because they are constantly inundated with news about the conflict and the negotiation process. Poloff spoke with many Azerbaijanis who had no clue about the release of the framework agreement, but each shared strong opinions against the idea of a referendum. For them and for the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis, this is a red line that they do not want their government to cross.

#### COMMENT

-----

¶12. (C) Public release of the Minsk Group core principles has laid the groundwork for a nuanced discussion of the merits of the principles. However, with public opinion overwhelmingly opposed to any compromise that would affect the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the small group of analysts leading the debate right now faces a very tough challenge. In order to create the environment necessary for a lasting peace, the public must engage in a broad and far-reaching debate on the merits of peace versus war, and the costs and benefits of

BAKU 00001164 004 OF 004

each to Azerbaijan's future. This presents an enormous policy challenge for the GOAJ. Its lack of public reaction to the analysts' July 28 statement, coupled with President Aliyev's initial, positive reaction to the principles' release (ref b), seems to indicate that the GOAJ understands the challenge and is giving political activists room for debate.

HYLAND